

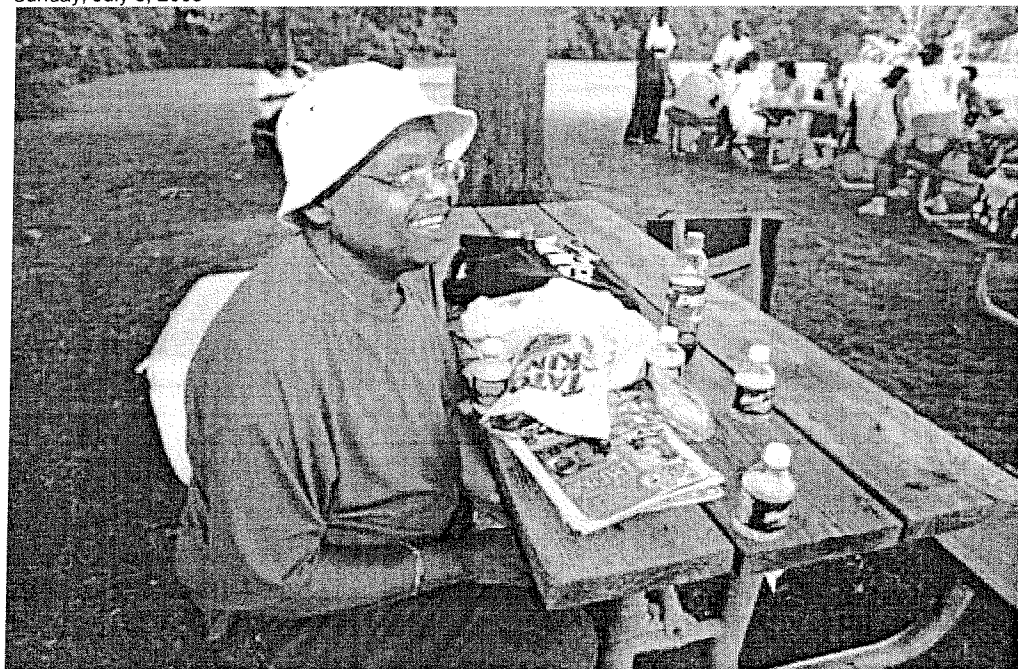


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Sunday, July 3, 2005



Velvet S. McNeil / The Detroit News

Teacher Henry Cabanne of Detroit says he will support a parks millage renewal, because parks provide an invaluable learning environment.

## Cities seek fair share for parks

Suburban leaders say some towns give more tax money than they get to run recreation areas.

By Amy Lee / The Detroit News

Some suburban officials are demanding that Wayne County come up with a more equitable way to spend tax money raised for county parks projects as an Aug. 2 parks millage election looms.

Communities countywide have kicked in some \$68 million since the millage was established in 1996, but most of the spending on park amenities is concentrated in cities that contribute the least.

"There's clearly an equity problem," said Canton Township Supervisor Tom Yack. "In 10 years we've sent millions and gotten about \$600,000 spent here in the township. Others

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have sent far less and gotten far more. This just does not make for good public policy."

The inequity threatens support for the 9-year-old millage, which raises \$11.5 million yearly to upgrade and maintain 12 parks.

Among the gripes:

- Livonia taxpayers have contributed at least \$7.7 million since the millage was established in 1996, but only \$183,000 of that was spent in the city for a gazebo and waterfall restoration at Newburgh Lake in Hines Park.

- Dearborn taxpayers have funneled about \$7.6 million since 1996, but just \$125,000 will come back to the city for the Rouge River Gateway clean water project.

- Redford Township, which has paid more than \$2 million via the millage, has received \$594,000.

Meanwhile, other cities have contributed less but received substantial capital improvement funds for park projects, simply because they have county land within their borders.

Trenton taxpayers, for instance, have kicked in about \$1.4 million since the millage was enacted, but have seen \$4.2 million in upgrades to Elizabeth Park, including a playscape, a pavilion and renovations to its tourist lodge.

Detroit, the site of numerous parks including Fort Wayne, Rouge Park and Palmer Park, has received nearly \$18 million, or about 47 percent of all capital improvement funding.

The Wayne County parks system was established in 1919, long before the county's now-affluent outer-ring suburbs began to thrive. As the population has shifted away from Detroit, concerns have grown that the outlying areas are propping up the parks budget and getting little in return.

Meanwhile, cities and townships are maintaining their own noncounty public spaces either through separate millages or their general funds.

Detroit's Henry Cabanne, 42, plans to support the millage renewal, as he did when it was established in 1996 and again for its 2000 renewal.

"It's money well spent," said Cabanne, an environmental sciences teacher at Detroit's Cass Technical High School. "Parks are for more than just recreation; they're also a wonderful learning environment."

In the suburbs, no commissioner or community leader wants to appear to be against parks, but many grumble about the spending patterns.

County Commissioner Laura Cox, R-Livonia, says parks administrators decide how to spend millage money with little or no input from local leaders.

In some cases, communities without county land have received some cash after they clamored to parks officials, but the process is hit-or-miss. Canton, for example, has contributed \$4.5 million but, lacking a county park, it garnered \$600,000 for the 420-seat Village Theater of Cherry Hill only after vigorous pleading.

Yet Belleville taxpayers have contributed only \$100,502 over the nine-year millage and garnered more than \$1 million in amenities, including a \$100,000 skate park and \$1 million for Belleville Lake improvements.

A May proposal by one commissioner that the county give back 50 percent of millage money to local communities quickly fizzled.

"We send millions each year. There's a feeling in my district that they do not get any kind of return for that money," said Cox. "I don't think that's fair. We should have some kind of equity or plan or system to get the money back to the communities more fairly."

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County Executive Robert Ficano's staff is in the final stages of crafting a policy to deal with the perceived inequities, according to Alan Helmkamp, assistant county executive for government relations. The policy would outline how local officials could request funding for parks and programs in their community.

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"We don't want there to be huge disparities where communities feel like they're sending money downtown and not getting any bang for their buck," Helmkamp said.

"This will be more objective, so funding doesn't rest on whether one community leader is more aggressive or how much clout one commissioner has downtown. We're trying to level the playing field so that everybody can come in and pitch an idea."

Helmkamp said the millage enables the parks department to have money on hand, often a crucial component when applying for grants that require a local contribution. In addition, the millage pays for administrative, maintenance and operational costs that benefit all county parks, he said.

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### **How other counties work**

Oakland County also levies 0.25 mill to fund its 12 expansive county parks, most of which are in the less-dense northern half of the county. The parks system and millage, backed by county voters since 1966, funds each of the parks of 200-plus acres and pays for 12 mobile units, which can bring climbing walls, inflatable toys and nature exhibits to the southeastern areas of the county, said Oakland County parks spokeswoman Janet Pung.

In Macomb County, the \$1 million parks budget for the 100-acre Freedom Hill and 23-mile Macomb Orchard Trail comes from the county's general fund. Ticket sales, parking fees and advertising at the Freedom Hill Amphitheatre kick back about \$250,000 to the fund, said Jim Perna, president of the county's parks and recreation department.

Wayne County oversees more than 5,000 acres of parkland. About two-thirds of it is concentrated in the sprawling 17-mile Hines Park, which winds through Livonia, Northville, Plymouth, Westland, Dearborn and Dearborn Heights.

The parks millage over the past nine years has provided \$1.7 million at Hines Park for street hockey rinks, basketball courts, parking lots and renovations to the rest rooms, among other upgrades.

The county park system also includes athletic fields, at least 35 picnic areas, an aquatic center, two golf courses, ice skating rinks, a pony ride facility and a marina and boat launch.

The good fishing at Hines Park's Newburgh Lake has been a big draw for Livonia resident Oscar Williams, 76, for four decades. Earlier this summer, he showed the ropes to his 8-year-old grandson at the lake.

The county recently spent millage money for Newburgh Lake upgrades, and Williams said he was glad his tax dollars were spent in the popular nearby park.

"I don't think people are going to like continuing to pay it," he said.

"Now that the work is done, shouldn't the taxes go down?"

The county parks millage amounts to about \$25 a year on a Wayne County home with a market value of \$200,000.

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## Paying for parks

Many Wayne County suburbs pay far more toward parks upkeep than they receive.

Community	Millage contribution 1997-2004	Percentage of parks fund	Spending per community*	Percentage of parks spending
Allen Park	\$1,554,783.66	2.3%	\$0	0%
Flat Rock	533,115.98	0.8	0	0
Gibraltar	194,033.97	0.3	0	0
Grosse Pointe City	580,297.54	0.8	0	0
Grosse Pointe Farms	1,291,352.19	1.8	0	0
Grosse Pointe Park	648,001.95	1.2	0	0
Grosse Pointe Woods	1,295,944.41	1.9	0	0
Hamtramck	248,199.76	0.4	0	0
Lincoln Park	1,066,496.57	1.6	0	0
Melvindale	299,460.31	0.4	0	0
Northville	218,779.47	0.3	0	0
Plymouth	634,827.03	0.9	0	0
River Rouge	563,402.14	0.8	0	0
Riverview	591,537.66	0.9	0	0
Romulus	1,386,715.81	2.0	0	0
Woodhaven	829,762.36	1.2	0	0
Brownstown Twp.	847,537.85	1.2	0	0
Grosse Ile Twp.	941,847.93	1.4	0	0
Grosse Pointe Twp.	510,561.28	0.7	0	0
Huron Twp.	557,964.03	0.8	0	0
Garden City	970,451.13	1.4	100,000	0.3
Wyandotte	703,836.67	1.0	100,000	0.3
Dearborn	7,631,106.65	11.2	125,000	0.3
Livonia	7,708,655.24	11.3	183,000	0.5
Highland Park	179,969.79	0.3	200,000	0.5
Harper Woods	656,253.09	1.0	221,000	0.6
Ecorse	369,587.64	0.5	250,000	0.7
Taylor	1,855,537.09	2.7	250,000	0.7
Rockwood	132,768.36	0.2	500,000	1.3
Wayne	660,464.18	1.0	500,000	1.3
Inkster	401,459.70	0.6	558,523	1.5
Redford Twp.	2,030,578.48	3.0	594,714	1.6
Canton Twp.	4,495,551.44	6.6	600,000	1.6
Sumpter Twp.	322,604.55	0.5	764,431	2.0
Southgate	1,187,474.60	1.7	850,000	2.2
Northville Twp.	2,041,307.05	3.0	980,594	2.6
Plymouth Twp.	2,902,059.39	4.2	993,011	2.6
Bellville	100,502.42	0.1	1,100,000	2.9
Van Buren Twp.	1,109,134.77	1.6	2,000,000	5.3
Dearborn Heights	2,100,888.41	3.1	2,046,518	5.4
Westland	2,905,755.64	4.2	3,079,414	8.1
Trenton	1,451,890.55	2.1	4,216,081	11.1
Detroit	11,518,632.81	16.8	17,897,099	47.3

Note: Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

\*Includes provisions through 2018.

Source: Wayne County

The Detroit News

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